

# OPINION

## Milican Dalton - An inspiration or a symbol of the diversity issues we face?



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Considering participation in outdoor learning and adventurous activities, do we need to challenge perceptions of the outdoors as an activity space? Recent research from the Outward Bound Trust (1, 2, 3) shows that despite growing awareness of the lack of diversity in outdoor education and adventurous activities, there is still a long way to go before participation demographics achieve parity with national demographics.

I was listening to a podcast (4) recently which was discussing the life of Milican Dalton, an adventurer and activity leader who was particularly active in the Lake District in the early 20th Century. Styling himself the 'Professor of Adventure', he led groups of men and women from urban areas on walks and climbs, apparently paying scant regard to what we would consider as 'safe practice' in modern times! He had a very interesting life, initially raised in modern day Cumbria, his family moved to Essex where a young Dalton started work as an insurance clerk. Quickly Dalton realised this was not his calling in life, his habit of sleeping in a tent in his garden rather than living inside the house was probably a clear sign that he was destined for wilder places than the fringes of London! From his early thirties onwards, he spent the summer living in a cave in Borrowdale up until the age of 79 when he passed away in his Bedfordshire 'Winter Home', which had by that time become a tent after his wooden hut burned down.

An adventurer to the very end, Millican Dalton was many people's idealised view of an early 20th Century outdoorsman. Tough, daring, resilient, incredibly knowledgeable of the outdoor world, he was apparently always wearing shorts and constantly sported a woodbine cigarette between his lips.

However, whilst Dalton himself is relatively unknown outside of the Lake District, in years gone by has it not always been the image of Dalton, or someone like him, that has dominated many people's visualisation of an adventurer? The rugged appearance, the devil may care attitude, the extreme lengths he went to in order to live a life in the outdoors? Personally, I think the man did good things for our love of the outdoors, he introduced urban dwellers to the delights of the Lake District at a time when it was very much a middle-to-upper-class leisure destination. He ran climbing trips for women where they would wear trousers, at a time where this was considered most inappropriate in society. His expeditions were fairly inclusive by the standards of the day, crossing class and gender





divides to an extent. He was also a vegetarian and teetotaler which would have contrasted him from his former colleagues in London, no doubt. On the surface, it seems we have a fairly progressive outdoor adventure practitioner. However, I would argue that the image of Milican Dalton and others like him is, to some extent, what puts people off exploring the outdoors.

When talking to friends and young people not involved with outdoor education, one of the common themes that comes up is the perception that outdoor education, particularly more adventurous pursuits, is still only for the Daltons of the world. The strong, fearless experts that dominate our literature and history and not people 'like them'. This view is certainly more common among women and people of colour, but not exclusively. Many men that I talk to don't consider that they fit into the 'rugged outdoors' category and therefore don't explore

activities and opportunities outdoors. Is the lionising of adrenaline fuelled activities and their participants actually turning newcomers off because of the perceived inaccessibility? Should we in fact, be promoting a broader range of practitioners to celebrate in the outdoor world and demonstrate the wide variety of outdoor activities available to people, not focus primarily on activities requiring certain physical attributes?

We have seen groups like Muslim Hikers and Black Girls Hike being formed over the past couple of years, especially following the national lockdowns. The countryside and outdoors is open to all; in England, the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (5) ensured that we are all invited to the party, but is everyone being asked to dance? Some of the negative comments on social media posts, most notably directed at Muslim Hikers and Black Girls Hike around group sizes and perceived lack of knowledge or equipment, show that the outdoors could still be seen as an exclusionary environment. On social media, you can often see comments criticising clothing and equipment choices of inexperienced visitors in outdoor settings, which does nothing to encourage newcomers and paints a picture of an exclusive club that doesn't welcome those without the correct skills or equipment. We should be encouraging those new to our activities and places, sharing our experience and passing on knowledge, not mocking them for a lack of equipment or for not knowing conventions. Being made to feel welcome and wanted, that is inclusion. We all started somewhere, and some people need the occasional reminder of that!

Whilst there are a growing number of initiatives to encourage diversity in the outdoors, I believe that the perception of outdoor environments remains dominated by white males, which I believe is at least partly due to the role models and activities we choose to promote. Part of the beauty of outdoor education, for me, is the incredible diversity of activities that make up 'outdoor learning'; from traditional crafts to the natural world and the more adventurous activities. We should celebrate this diversity and promote it widely to challenge some of the perceptions people have of 'who does what' in the outdoors. From my own experience, there very much remains the perception that women take on the forest school and nature-orientated roles, whereas the men lead the climbing expeditions and kayak down raging rivers. This perception is of course partly based in reality in terms of the proportion of men and women currently in these roles and therefore not hugely surprising.

What is surprising though is how little we appear to do to promote the less extreme activities and more diverse practitioners, including those at different stages of expertise, into the wider consciousness. Would we gain a huge amount of diversity within the outdoor industry if we were to promote and celebrate the idea that a lack of expertise or extreme levels of fitness is not a barrier to participation? I'm sure most of us would agree that whatever our chosen area of outdoor education, there is always more to learn and new skills to acquire. Perhaps doing more to show newcomers that our chosen field is an ever-evolving journey and that none of us are truly 'expert', then we might go some way to attracting more diverse participants in every sense - no one should be put off by the idea that you need to live in a cave to be considered a true outdoor adventurer! ▲

#### REFERENCES

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